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'Amazing Difference' With eServicing

FSA and our Modernization Partner have just made life a little easier for our customer service representatives (CSRs). eServicing, an Accenture service currently being piloted at FSA call centers in Utica, NY, and Bakersfield, CA, has shown promising results for streamlining the Direct Loans processing procedure.

eServicing is a Windows-based program that allows CSRs to customize information, view several loan repayment models simultaneously and immediately apply and communicate transactions.

"The difference is amazing. This is really a breakthrough for us in customer service," said Dan Lasher, senior supervisor in Borrower Services. "It makes us able to handle callers in a much more timely manner."

Unlike the old software, eServicing allows CSRs to confirm information about borrowers on a "pop-up" screen. In previous systems, a voice response unit initially recorded caller information that the CSR would then have to re-verify with the caller.

eServicing also links different screens through mouse clicks, while the previous system had 21 different screens that CSRs had to navigate. The software also includes a repayment calculator that allows representatives to view and discuss all types of payment models at the same time.

Jennifer Douglas, general manager of the Students Channel, visited the Utica, NY, call center and witnessed the new software in action. "I'm very enthusiastic about eServicing," she said. "The CSRs had an easy adjustment period and the capacity of the software is remarkable."

In addition to helping call center employees, the new system also assists customers, Jennifer said. "Callers are being served more efficiently with eServicing."

Representatives will eventually be able to use the software to send letters, change repayment plans, and update addresses electronically, along with other borrower service-related functions. "It will cut down on time and paper," Dan said.

Though at first resistant to change, Dan said the 15 CSRs piloting the software in Utica and the 35 in Bakersfield "can't imagine going back. It's easier for them because the information is so readily available."

For questions about the new system, please contact Kerry Trahan at (703) 947-2899

Operating Partner Pool Saves Time, Adds Value

The contracting process for modernization solutions at FSA just got simpler, smarter and faster.

The Office of Acquisitions and Contract Performance has developed a new concept: the Operating Partners Pool. Previous contracting techniques called for announcing new acquisitions to the entire business community every time a modernization need arises and choosing from many contractors. The new process works differently — the Operating Partner gets selected up front and works with Accenture during development.

Accenture, as the Modernization Partner, is charged with reducing and eliminating FSA's redundant and outdates systems. Accenture staff work closely with FSA to achieve the vision contained in the Modernization Blueprint.

As Accenture devises solutions to achieve this vision, needs ultimately exist for operating the new systems. The Pool provides a source of these operations.

The new partners in the Pool are AFSA, EDS,

We Help Put America Through School

Operating Partner Pool Eases Process of Finding Modernization Solutions

Coray Gurnitz Consulting, Deva Group, NCS Pearson, Dyncorp and USA Education (also known as Sallie Mae). They were selected through comprehensive market research and a selection process that narrowed a field of 36 companies to the final seven.

The process started with an extensive amount of market research to identify the best capabilities and expertise. Next came the competition, where each firm provided oral presentations and submitted price proposals. The companies had to demonstrate their ability to deliver effective solutions by proposing sample tasks for a group of FSA evaluators, who also checked the companies' past performance. Only the most advantageous were chosen.

Under the new process, the companies' past performance and price will be matched up with a panel's recommendations, and a partner will be chosen. In essence, a process that often takes several months in its current form will be reduced to as little as a few weeks.

The new system will provide several benefits for FSA — in addition to streamlining the process of selecting a contractor, the new operating partners will be better able to understand FSA's needs by working with our staff on a frequent basis. And, as the operating partners learn more about FSA, they will be able to offer better proposals based on their knowledge of our organization.

If you need help with a contract or have a question about the new Operating Partners Pool, please contact Natalie Taylor at (202) 377-4006.

Program Integrity Goal Will Get Big Boost from AAA Team

Last year, Secretary Paige instituted a Department-wide thrust to improve program integrity, the focus of which is FSA's removal from the General Accounting Office's High Risk List and receiving a clean financial audit.

Even though program integrity has recently moved into the limelight for the Department at large, FSA has a history of promoting integrity in order to better serve students who benefit from federal aid programs and to ensure that hard-earned taxpayer dollars are spent correctly.

"Individual institutions draw down millions of dollars on the behalf of students receiving aid every year," said Mary Gust, director of Administrative Actions and Appeals (AAA). "If FSA is not concerned with program integrity, it discredits the government as the overseers of this money."

A staff including management analysts, paralegals and policy makers form AAA. "We are very important because AAA initiates the administrative actions that puts an end to abuse of federal student aid," said Kathleen Hochhalter, AAA paralegal.

Before the formulation of AAA, this team existed under different names such as the Participation Control Branch, Program Compliance Branch, and the Compliance and En-forcement Division. "We have responded over the years to what has happened in the schools that receive student aid funds," said Mark Gilbert, paralegal specialist.

With over 6,000 schools receiving Title IV funds, it is to be expected that some schools will need AAA's assistance in complying with the guidelines to continue receiving aid. "After case teams try to get schools into compliance and schools do not adhere to the requests, AAA steps in and takes more adverse action against the school, which can lead to termination of eligibility," Mary said.

This action cuts back on the mismanagement of funds by schools and, in some extreme instances, catches cases of fraud. For example, several schools in Puerto Rico falsified Ability to Benefit tests and were illegally receiving aid. AAA stepped in and terminated their eligibility. This type of fast and direct action saves money and protects students and taxpayers.

AAA is an integral component in FSA's achievement of program integrity. "We are here to protect our students," Mary said. "Ultimately, if we are not concerned about program integrity, programs will not be administered properly. If programs are not administered properly, funds don't get to the right students."

ECM Makes Changing Software a Breeze

A new tool will make it easier to compile and keep track of software changes for IT development. The Enterprise Change Management (ECM) tool will inform CIO and other FSA and Mod Partner employees about requests to change programs and help them more effectively share virtual workspace.

The ECM tool provides a collaborative workspace that allows employees to manage and track software change activity between FSA's technology teams and the Virtual Data Center (VDC). FSA employees will be able to access and receive online reports about change request activity.

"Changes are being managed, reviewed and added in a timely way," said Ronald Langkamp, the Accenture project lead for the ECM initiative. "The team knows where the change requests are, when they are scheduled to be implemented and what to expect."

FSA CIO, the VDC and our Modernization Partner piloted the ECM tool in the spring and found it effectively captured change requests across two CIO modernization efforts. The tool should be implemented with all programs controlled by the VDC by the end of October.

Since the pilot began, the CIO project has logged 33 change requests successfully and not lost any change requests due to miscommunication. The change request process also

> "The team knows where the change requests are, when they are scheduled to be implemented and what to expect."
>
> —CIO's Ronald Langkamp

addresses an Inspector General audit finding from last year that FSA did not have an ECM process in place.

Previously, the change request process was not formally documented. The VDC team and IT services reviewed each request and then sent e-mails notifying affected parties of any changes. However, as FSA pursued more modernization efforts, e-mail proved unreliable and accountability for changes decreased.

FSA teams voiced concerns that they were not being informed of changes and, as a result, their systems were affected.

"FSA had no central repository of all change records and so it was not easy to keep people apprised of progress," Ronald said. "The process needed to have application points of contact in the loop as well, as they could evaluate impact to their systems quickly."

CIO is continuing with a phased rollout of the ECM tool across modernization efforts. The next phase will affect operating partner applications such as FAFSA and the Central Processing System and will last through mid-August.

The final phase will start in early August and focus on applications not managed at the VDC, such as eServicing and Common Origination and Disbursement.

For questions about the new tool, please contact Ronald Langkamp at 202-962-0752.

EXTRA! EXTRA!

Kristie Hansen Joins FSA

On July 1, 2002, Kristie Hansen begins her position as the new general manager of the Financial Partners Channel.

Previously, Kristie was the executive vice president for the National Council of Higher Education Loan Programs (NCHELP). She replaces the esteemed John Reeves, who is joining College Funding Services, Inc.

Kristie has the industry background and knowledge of FSA as an organization and the challenges we face. As general manager, she will work the financial aid community and others who administer student loans through the FFEL Program.

Welcome to FSA, Kristie!

Financial Partners Reengineer

On June 3, 2002, the Financial Partners Channel released the Lender Reporting process, LAP. The new system gives lending institutions and servicers a convenient and efficient medium in which to verify and update their "demographic" information.

LAP reduces costs through automation and integrates FSA's Financial Management System, therefore improving data integrity. The new system also allows for quick edits and a faster processing time.

LAP can be accessed through the Financial Partners Portal at http://fp.ed.gov

Program Integrity

On May 21, 2002, Acquisitions and Contract Performance Office issued the Government Property Monitoring Plan to FSA contractors to eliminate waste, fraud and abuse. The plan provides a guideline for tracking and controlling FSA's resources to ensure the proper accountability of government equipment.

The new plan, used in conjunction with the Federal Acquisition Regulation, applies to all contracting officers, contracting officer representatives and property administrators.

This new system allows FSA to better track its supplies, equipment, allocation of funds and spending and in turn will assist FSA in achieving its top priority, program integrity.

My FSA

My FSA talked with several of our summer interns and asked them the question: "What is the coolest thing you've done at FSA?"
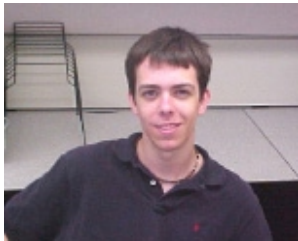
"The thing that has surprised me the most so far as an FSA intern is the level of dedication and commitment everyone at FSA has towards 'helping put America through school.' I have had internships at other companies in the past and haven't seen people with as much pride and effort in their work as I have seen here. It's a contagious attitude and pushes me to do my best work and contribute my share."

—Ken Cutrell, CIO

"Implementing an undocumented, virtually unheard of Java SMTP class as part of an enterprise Java servlet. This servlet processes the results of a survey that will be available on FSANet, submits the results to a database and e-mails the results to team members who wish to run statistics on these data. The fun of this Java class being undocumented is that I had to figure a lot on my own. I could have gone a different route with documented code, but I decided to have some fun."

—Aaron Rankin, CIO

"I read a lot of different documents and studies that are concerned with issues like access to postsecondary education, debt burden after college, state and institutional aid and default rates. I've done about 80 summaries of studies, [and we're] going to put them up on the Program Analysis site. It allows everyone in Program Analysis to better understand these pertinent financial aid issues. I also created a newsletter with another co-worker that features news and projects."

—Jean Wakely, Analysis

"I enjoyed giving a presentation for Senior Leadership on a database conversion from Lotus Approach to Microsoft Access Office 2000. It gave me the opportunity to improve my application development skills. I also liked working on redesigning FSA COACH. It let me do Web development, which is what I plan to do when I leave here."

—Stephanie Williams, CIO

Coming Next Month...

An interview with Kristie Hansen, the new general manager of the Financial Partners Channel!